

POLICY BRIEF

Integrating gender responsive strategies into the COVID-19 Economic Response Plan (CERP): What can be done?

Photo: Saw Htee Wai Khing/UN Women

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INTRODUCTION:

Why does gender matter in COVID-19 response?

This policy brief provides information on how the COVID-19 pandemic affects women and men differently in the economic and social spheres and highlight specific challenges facing women in Myanmar.

It suggests actions that the government can take to address the challenges and long-term solutions to advance gender equality for more resilient and inclusive economy. COVID-19 is more than a public health crisis,

it also has adverse economic and social impact to men and women. Evidence suggested that the impact of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls, particularly in the area of work, migration and violence against women.

More than 90 per cent of women who work are in the *informal sector*, mostly in the rural areas¹. There are 2.8 million micro and small enterprises in Myanmar and a considerable

¹ ASEAN 2019, 'Regional Study on Informal Employment Statistics to Support Decent Work Promotion in ASEAN', p. 24

number of women are engaged in informal economic activities that mostly fall into that category. Informal workers do not have employment contracts and are not subjected to national labour legislation or entitlement to certain benefits². Before the pandemic, the average hourly wage among women is already 24 percent lower than average wages among men³, and COVID-19 is expected to worsen the working conditions for women.

Women migrate at a higher rate than men in Myanmar, constituting 53 per cent of all internal migrants⁴. Many women *migrate internally* work in the formal sector; more than 700,000 people are employed in the garment sector in Myanmar⁵, and an estimated 90 per cent of them are women⁶. Export-oriented industries have been hard hit by the economic downturns and 50 percent garment workers are at risk of either being suspended without pay or losing their jobs permanently⁷.

About 789,000 Myanmar women are currently overseas for domestic and care work in the informal sector; following

COVID-19, more than 100,000 migrant workers have returned from Thailand to Myanmar⁸. Migrant workers (35 per cent are women)⁹, returning from neighbouring countries, especially those work in the informal sector which women constitute the majority, are generally excluded from social protection such as health insurance, paid sick and maternity leave, and unemployment benefit, etc. . Households who rely on remittance have also become more vulnerable.

Myanmar has a high prevalence of gender-based violence, as 15 per cent of women aged 15- 49 report ever experiencing physical violence since the age of 15¹⁰. With restrictions of movement and increasing economic pressure, violence against women and girls in various forms are expected to increase¹¹. Increasing economic hardship may heighten the risk of human trafficking and child marriage.

The pandemic has increased the demand for unpaid care work. For example, the closure of schools creating additional hours of childcare work for women; women also

² ASEAN 2019, 'Regional Study on Informal Employment Statistics to Support Decent Work Promotion in ASEAN', p. 3

³ Central Statistical Organization (CSO), UNDP and WB, 2020, 'Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017: Socio-economic Report', p.81

⁴ UNESCO 2018, 'Internal migration in Southeast Asia: an initiative to better understand migrants' experiences and develop inclusive policy responses', p.5

⁵ United Nations Myanmar 2020, 'UN strengthens efforts to reduce socio-economic impact of COVID-19', press release, <https://myanmar.un.org/en/43177-un-strengthens-efforts-reduce-socio-economic-impact-covid-19>

⁶ International Labour Organization (ILO) 2019, 'Weaving gender: challenges and opportunities for the Myanmar garment industry', p. 4, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms_672751.pdf

⁷ United Nations Myanmar 2020, 'UN strengthens efforts to reduce socio-economic impact of COVID-19', press release, <https://myanmar.un.org/en/43177-un-strengthens-efforts-reduce-socio-economic-impact-covid-19>

⁸ ILO, 2020, 'COVID-19: Impact on migrant workers and country response in Thailand'

⁹ OCHA and UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Myanmar 2020, 'UN supports Myanmar nationals returning from abroad', <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/un-supports-myanmar-nationals-returning-abroad>

¹⁰ Ministry of Health and Sport (MOHS) 2017, '2015-16 Myanmar Demographic and Health Survey Key Findings', p. 15, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/SR235/SR235.pdf>

¹¹ Lambrecht, I et. al. A gender-transformative response to COVID-19, IFPRI, May 2020.

share more burden in additional cooking and cleaning work. Women who do not have support in care are more likely to leave their job.

Fear of contracting COVID-19 and disruption to medical services and supply chain could increase the already high maternal and infant mortality rates (at 282 per 1,000 livebirth, the maternal mortality rate is the second highest in the region¹²), as well as

HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases¹³.

The COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan of the Myanmar Government would need to consider the heightened vulnerability of women and girls and strive to be more gender sensitive and inclusive in its implementation and evolution. As a living document, it nevertheless presents an opportunity to be continuously adapted to achieve gender-transformative impact.

¹² Myanmar Humanitarian Needs overview, 2020, 'United Nations Gender Theme Group Advocacy Tool for Mainstreaming of Gender

Equality and Women's Empowerment into the UN Socio-Economic Workstream in Myanmar'

¹³ Gender and COVID-19, UN Women.

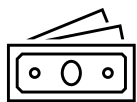
Recommendations to integrate gender responsive strategies into the CERP

General recommendations

- Put women and girls at the centre of the response; consult with the relevant government sectors at Union and State/region level and members of the gender equality machinery including women's rights organisations in the review, actionable/feasible measures, implementation and monitoring of the Plan
- Clearly identify and differentiate the target beneficiaries as per sex, age, ethnicity, income, and other social-economic and vulnerability criteria to inform the development of context-specific implementation strategies, including in urban, rural and conflict situations
- Develop comprehensive monitoring matrix which includes gender and age disaggregated indicators
- Empower national gender coordination mechanisms to promote gender mainstreaming in COVID-19 response and recovery strategies and provide technical support and capacity building interventions on gender mainstreaming to key actors
- Leverage on various support programmes to promote women's empowerment

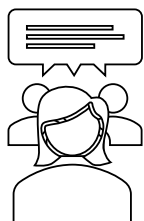


Photo: Su Lay Ngone/UN Women



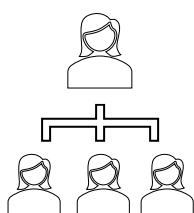
Goal 1: Improve Macroeconomic Environment through Monetary Stimulus

- Conduct comprehensive gender impact assessments at the household level and undertake context-specific socio-economic impact analyses of COVID-19
- Review fiscal policies to advocate and formulate women's economic empowerment schemes with specific attention for rural women's economic empowerment



Goal 2: Ease the Impact on the Private Sector

- Assess the impact of measures directed at sectors and types of businesses in which women are overrepresented and (re)design gender-responsive support schemes, e.g. increasing credit guarantee (2.1.2) and extending loan restructuring and rescheduling 2.1.6) to women-owned enterprises
- Develop a multi-stakeholder National Women Entrepreneurship Development Strategy and Action Plan with policy targets, objectives, actions, a budget, and a monitoring and evaluation framework
- Explicitly target women farmers and entrepreneurs for any cash transfer programmes, technical assistance and input provisions (2.1.7)
- Ensure that women farmers are not left out in the process and have equal access to all forms of support, information and financial schemes (2.1.7)
- Create a government-backed loan guarantee scheme for women-owned businesses



Goal 3 Easing the impact of labourers and workers

- Develop and prioritize mitigation strategies that specifically focus on the livelihoods of the most vulnerable women and men, including informal sector workers
- Ensure eligibility and targeting processes for labour extension benefits (3.1.1) and ensure the community infrastructure projects (3.1.2) are inclusive of women returnees and women are in informal sector in these projects

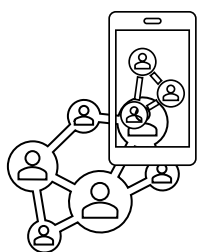


Goal 4 Easing the impact of households

- Identify the most vulnerable section of the population, recognize women head of household of vulnerable communities, in coordination with state/ region governments and DSW, e.g. through Myanmar National Committee on Women

(MNCW), and discuss and agree on short and long term solutions; women and girls should be involved in all consultations (4.1.2)

- Provide unconditional cash and in-kind transfer, particularly to women-headed households (4.1.2).
- Utilize women farmers and their products, encourage their household production for their livelihood support. Set targets (4.1.2)
- Ensure that single women, women headed households are given equal priority in giving flexibility related to interest and mortgage payment for households negatively affected by COVID-19 (4.1.3)
- Develop guideline to negotiate with private financial institutions including microfinance institutions to give more flexibility related to interest, mortgage, and repayments for women borrowers and women-headed households



Goal 5: Promoting Innovative Products & Platforms

- Adapt or develop and deliver “digital literacy for business” training programmes for women entrepreneurs
- Explore the development of an ICT voucher scheme for women-owned micro- and small-sized enterprises, in order to increase their access to training and other consultancy services that support women to use ICTs in their businesses.
- Deliver a standardized financial literacy programme to women clients who borrow to finance their income-generating activities, which could be combined with capacity building on digital literacy.



Goal 6: Healthcare Systems Strengthening

- Review and revise the existing standard operation procedures (SOPs) and guidelines for quarantine centres/facilities with gender-based violence preventive and response measures, and for health care workers and caregivers to access women-friendly personal protective equipment and menstrual hygiene products to ensure these centers are gender friendly and takes into account special needs of women and girl child, pregnant or lactating women
- Ensure gender based discrimination, violence and harassment free environment through guidelines and rules put in place orientation to all staff and occupants and have complaint mechanism in place

- Advocate for national recovery plans to address occupational sex segregation, skills and training gaps, and sexual harassment in the workplace in the healthcare system.
- Develop and behavioral change communication strategy with key messages to beneficiaries regarding leadership and self-esteem for women and guidance on improving health and nutrition (6.1.3)
- Formulate tailor healthcare interventions for survivors of GBV, women with disabilities and women living with HIV/AIDS, and train healthcare workers to safely handle disclosures of GBV with a survivor-centered approach, and be familiar with existing multi-sectoral support mechanisms, referral pathways for GBV, child protection and psychosocial support, health, legal assistance, and case management.
- Ensure that PPEs are tailored to women's size and that they are not ill-fitting to ensure maximum protection and effectiveness (6.1.2/6.1.4)
- Organise public campaigns against violence against women and girls, strengthen support to service organisations, and ensure continuation and strengthening of support to court and legal service provision for gender-based violence cases



Goal 7: Increase Access to COVID-19 Response Financing

- Review the existing GRB initiatives and formulate the instruction with specific (re)allocation (7.1.1) and procedures to mainstreaming gender issues in the government's COVID-19 response budget plan (7.1.2) to anticipate and mitigate the adverse impact on gender equity
- Incorporate gender-responsiveness and women's empowerment when acquiring external finance, particularly focus on long-term development of women's skills, agency, and address the burden of unpaid care work